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Exodus 23:20-33

Fifty-second Message

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# ACCOMPANIED BY ANGELS<sup>1</sup>

*SERIES: CREATING COMMUNITIES OF SHALOM IN DAILY LIFE*

Do you enjoy conflict? I imagine few of us relish the conflicts that life brings our way. Perhaps like me, you've mastered the art of "avoidance" to negotiate your way around conflict when you see it coming. You know which meetings to avoid at work, how to dodge an abusive boss, or stay out of harm's way from an angry spouse or an alcoholic parent. Yet every night as we watch the national news and are painfully reminded that our world is embroiled in strife and wars without end, it's tempting to close our eyes and withdraw into the safe shelters of our private worlds. But God's people are not to be naïve about or isolated from conflict. There is a global war on that is shaping the destiny of mankind, and Christians are called to engage a fierce enemy. Going AWOL is not an option for the believer. But before people are willing to engage in battle and possibly place themselves in harm's way, several key questions need to be answered:

1. What is our objective?
2. Where are we going, and how we will get there?
3. What kind of resistance will we face?
4. What is our responsibility in the battle?
5. How long should we expect the conflict to last?
6. What resources will we be given to survive?
7. What is the vision of victory for a new world?

We now come to the concluding section of the Book of the Covenant, in Exodus 23:20-33. God has faithfully delivered his people from slavery, bringing them through the fiery wilderness to meet with him on Mount Sinai. On this holy mountain he has given them the Ten Commandments, and followed with detailed instructions on how to apply the commandments in their daily lives in order to create communities of *shalom*. It is now time to leave the mountain to begin the journey to the Promised Land. This is a pivotal about-face in the book, as Peter Enns explains: "whereas the first eighteen chapters of Exodus prepared Israel for its climactic appearance before God on the mountain, this section begins our journey down the mountain, symbolically speaking, by giving more detailed attention to the possession of the land."<sup>2</sup> But possession of the land will not be an easy task; it will involve a fierce conflict against insurmountable odds that will demand the highest degree of trust in God, and faithfulness to his instructions, or there will be little hope for survival.

Our text has two broad divisions. In the first (23:20-26), God delineates clear lines of responsibilities for each party involved in the battle; in the second (23:27-33), he explains the actual battle strategy once Israel arrives in the land.

## I. The Responsibility of the Angelic Guide Exod 23:20-

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**"See, I am sending an angel ahead of you to guard you along the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared. Pay attention to him and listen to what he says. Do not rebel against him; he**

**will not forgive your rebellion, since my Name is in him. If you listen carefully to what he says and do all that I say, I will be an enemy to your enemies and will oppose those who oppose you. My angel will go ahead of you and bring you into the land of the Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hivites and Jebusites, and I will wipe them out. (Exod 23:20-23 NIV)**

As to the question, What is Israel's objective? the answer is clear: she is to take possession of the land that God has been preparing for her. This will be in fulfillment of the original promise given to Abraham centuries earlier. God has faithfully fulfilled the promise to create a "seed" from Abraham, and now the people will be given a place to settle that is as fertile as a new Eden.

As to how they will get there, God says he will provide his "angel" to lead and protect them along the way until they arrive safely in the land. Who is this divine messenger? The Hebrew term *mal'ak* means "messenger," but whenever the sender is God, it is translated "angel." This is the not the first mention of the angel in Exodus. The angel spoke to Moses out of the burning bush, when God commissioned him to deliver his people from Egypt. After their departure from Egypt, the angel provided both a front and rear guard to protect Israel from the advancing Egyptian army (14:19-20). The relationship between the angel and God appears so interchangeable that most commentators consider the divine messenger to be God in human form. God's name is on the angel. Rebelling against him is the same as rebelling against God; "what he says" and "all that I say" are treated syntactically as synonymous,<sup>3</sup> and after his appearance to Moses in the burning bush, it is the Lord who actually speaks (3:4).

Some commentators equate the angel of the Lord with Jesus Christ. But as Waltke explains, though

this argument is plausible in that both are distinct from God and yet equated with God...[but it] must be rejected for several reasons. First, more than one being, such as a priest or judge, can have the status of being distinct from God yet equated with God. Second, there is a crucial difference between the angel of I AM and Jesus Christ. Since in Christ's incarnation all the fullness of the godhead dwells in him bodily, there is no reason to think a pre-incarnate revelation of him would be anything less. Third, the New Testament never lowers the identity of the Son of God to an angel of any sort.<sup>4</sup>

What is clear is that the angel's abiding presence continues to give evidence that God is with his people every step of the way. But "He is not just with them, he is the dominant presence,"<sup>5</sup> leading Israel in front of them, protecting them from behind, and speaking to them from within. Therefore Israel must be extremely watchful to pay careful attention to his instructions, for God's name rests in him. Disobedience or rebellion will not be tolerated, and he will not forgive their sins. This warning is rather shocking to believers in the age of the New Covenant who daily count on the gift of forgiveness to survive our trials. But Fretheim makes the point: "It shows the se-

riousness with which God takes the relationship. Undivided loyalty is a matter concerning which God will not compromise; if one is unfaithful, one then stands outside the sphere in which the promise functions – no ifs, ands, or buts.”<sup>6</sup> And when we consider that the instructions given by the angel are delivered in the context of Holy War, it raises the stakes of obedience, for to disregard a command in the heat of battle can prove fatal. So while Israel found forgiveness after her earlier rebellions in the desert, to treat her Commander in Chief with disdain in the midst of battle will bring horrible consequences. This proved to be the case in the book of Numbers, when Israel “in their presumption” attempted to advance “toward the high hill country” (Num 14:44) without the Lord’s direction or presence. As a result, the nation suffered a devastating defeat, with many fatalities.

But on the other hand, careful obedience will ensure Israel of God’s continued presence in the angelic guide to lead them, a wall of safety to protect them, and a divine warrior to fight for them. As David later discovered in his wilderness battles, “The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them” (Psa 34:7). Israel’s obedience will cause her enemies to become the Lord’s enemies, and he will see to it that they are completely dispossessed from the land. Though Israel will be armed for battle, it will be God who will do the fighting and provide the victory.

When they arrive safely at their destination, Moses’ victory song of the sea will be sung with even more praise than at the Exodus:

**In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed.**

**In your strength you will guide them to your holy dwelling.**  
(Exod 15:13)

The gospel of Mark is shaped with a similar structure as Exodus. After Jesus comes through the waters of baptism, he leads his disciples in a new Exodus, with miraculous, feedings to a holy mountain where they hear the voice of God. When the Father speaks on the Mount of Transfiguration, rather than hearing Ten Words, the disciples hear only one: “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to Him!” (Mark 9:7). Instead of obeying the angel as they journey to the land, the disciples are to obey Jesus as he leads them to Jerusalem. During that journey, on three separate occasions Jesus makes it emphatically clear that in obedience to the Father and to secure our inheritance, he must die in that city (Mark 9:12, 31; 10:33-34). Rather than the disciples dying for their rebellion along the way, the King will die in their place, so that even when they betrayed and abandoned the Lord they were forgiven, reinstated because God had sealed them with the Holy Spirit of promise. And therefore in the New Covenant, though we are exhorted not to “grieve the Holy Spirit of God” as we journey toward the new Zion, we live with full assurance of forgiveness, because we have been permanently sealed with the Holy Spirit “for the day of redemption” (Eph 4:30).

Having explained the role of the angelic protector and guide, God now instructs Israel as to their role in the battle.

## II. The Responsibility of the People Exod 23:24-26

“Do not bow down before their gods or worship them or follow their practices. You must demolish them and break their sacred stones to pieces. Worship the LORD your God, and his blessing will be on your food and water. I will take away sickness from among you, and none will miscarry or be barren in your land. I will give you a full life span. (23:24-26)

The real battle for Israel will not be against flesh and blood, but in confronting the vile, idolatrous forces in the land. When Israel settles down in the land, she is commanded to demonstrate her loyalty to God by passionately destroying all forms of idolatrous expressions of worship. In Deuteronomy, the command is expanded to “Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones, cut down their Asherah poles and burn their idols in the fire” (Deut 7:5). Each act entails a complete and total destruction. As Brueggemann suggests: “The new land will be a place of rigorous theological decision. Israel must eliminate all the signs, symbols, and seductions of other faith options, must hew to the first commandment to worship ‘only Yahweh.’”<sup>7</sup> Allowing these sensuous and idolatrous images to remain in the land would leave the door open to powerful forces of idolatry. Unlike Adam, who remained silent in the garden while Satan was tempting his wife, Israel is not allowed to be passive in rooting out evil seductions, but is to take an active and primary role in cleansing a land replete with idolatry. God insists that his people do this. He flatly refuses to take the responsibility for it. He will guide, lead, protect and fight, but destroying the gateways to idolatry is left solely in the hands of his people.

If God’s people are faithful to destroy the gateways to idolatry, immeasurable blessings of life will be the result (Deut 7:12-15). The land will be utterly saturated with God’s goodness for life, with rain and fertility in every sphere. It will be a glorious new Eden, one that surpasses even the original.

In summary, it is essential that God’s people clearly differentiate between God’s responsibility in the battle and theirs. So often we get the roles reversed. We hear ringing battle cries from our pulpits and radios urging us to courageously confront and do battle with the rampant evil in the world. But sadly, more often than not we have neglected to clean our own house. Upon closer examination we find that our souls are littered with worldly debris and easy “links” to idolatry. Our computers have no filters to ward off pornography; our televisions have no limits or controls; our drive for our children’s educational success is never questioned; our appetites for consumption and spending are never disciplined; our debt is often out of control; our obsessive and compulsive work habits are never challenged, and our ability to be silent before God is non-existent.

But then on a rare occasion we hear a different voice in the congregation. Someone gets seriously sick or laid off or divorced or deeply wounded, and idols that once held sway are quickly forsaken and forgotten. God’s face, once distant, comes into full view, and with it streams of living water that refresh and revive war torn souls into gardens. When asked to give testimony, they speak not of God’s Spirit “leading them into battle to confront the world,” but how the Spirit “led” them “to put to death the deeds of the flesh,” and as a result they are living life to the fullest (Rom 8:13-14)!

Having clearly differentiated between God’s and Israel’s respective roles, the Lord now gives the divine strategy and expectations for the battle that will protect his people from fear, discouragement and hopelessness.

## III. Divine Strategy for the Battle Exod 23:27-33

### A. Before the Battle: “Fear Not” (23:27-28)

“I will send my terror ahead of you and throw into confusion every nation you encounter. I will make all your enemies turn their backs and run. I will send the hornet ahead of you to drive the Hivites, Canaanites and Hittites out of your way. (23:27-28)

When we consider that the best estimate of the total population that left Egypt was small in comparison to the Canaanites,<sup>8</sup> and that their military training was negligible, the thought of entering a land already occupied by “seven nations greater and stronger than you” (Deut 7:1) was a dreadful thing. But God counters such fear by assuring the nation that “The first thing the nations will see as Israel approaches is not Israel’s spears or armor or chariots or horses, but Israel’s God. He goes before them to intimidate would-be attackers and send them into terror and panic (23:27-28).”<sup>9</sup> Israel has nothing to fear from their lack of military training, strategic planning or physical strength. God is going to personally overwhelm their enemies prior to their actual confrontation with what he labels here his “terror” and “hornet,” to throw the enemy into mass confusion and panic.

When Israel entered the land and sent spies to Jericho, this was Rahab’s testimony to the spies, which prepared her to give her life to the God of Israel: “I know that the LORD has given you the land, and that the terror of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land have melted away before you...for the LORD your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath” (Josh 2:9,11).

This gives an entirely different lens with which to view the upcoming invasion. Rather than the Israelites viewing their role in the invasion like the allied assault against Nazi forces on D-Day, Stuart suggests that “The Israelites could, then, expect their conquest of Canaan to be, in effect, a rear guard action, a ‘mopping-up’ after the destruction of Yahweh would bring about in front of them as he led them into battle.” He also suggests that these four kinds of curses “terror/fear, confusions/helplessness, defeat in battle, and attack by wild animals/insects” are “samples of the full range of curses that will actually be unleashed” that are included in other texts.<sup>10</sup>

The same holds true with in the New Covenant community. The decisive battle with Satan has already been fought and won through the blood of Christ at the cross (Col 2:15). As a result, we are to view ourselves not as God’s marines, storming enemy beaches in the first wave of assault, but as an army of liberation that has arrived after God has broken the back of the enemy and has him on the run. This was the spirit of the apostles, who boldly marched forth into the enemy strongholds of Corinth, Ephesus, Athens and Rome, announcing freedom and victory to Satan’s former captives. They believed the words of Jesus that the gates of hell would not be able to prevail against this powerful liberation army. But like Israel of old, we must not presume to go where God has not sent us, for it too could be deadly. Instead we must wait on him, and like Paul, proceed only with divine direction and permission (Acts 16:6-9).

Moving from the temptation to fear prior to the battle, God then addresses discouragement that arises in the midst of the battle.

#### **B. During the Battle: “Stay Focused and Be Patient” (23:29-30)**

**“But I will not drive them out in a single year, because the land would become desolate and the wild animals too numerous for you. Little by little I will drive them out before you, until you have increased enough to take possession of the land. (23:29-30)**

God now removes any expectations his people might have for quick and speedy victory that does not require sustained effort and patient perseverance. He explains that, despite the fact that he will launch the initial offensive to cripple the enemy, it will take Israel quite some time to completely dispossess the Canaanite population from the land. The reason for this is that if God did clear the enemy

“overnight,” Israel would not have sufficient numbers or enough time to be able to clear, cultivate and protect the land on a large scale. Stuart explains: “In much of Canaan—an area of the world almost entirely devoid of farmable flatland—the best way to grow crops was through terrace farming, which was labor-intensive not merely in the planting, tending and harvesting but also in the preparing and maintenance of the terraces. Likewise, tree crops required extensive preparation and maintenance, and flocks and herds could not be left alone without proper protection or elaborate enclosure, let they be easy prey for various meat-eating wild animals.”<sup>11</sup>

Ironically, the slow process of clearing the land was a good thing, for the ongoing presence of Israel’s enemies actually held in check a worse enemy, the wild beasts. Menashe Har-El explains that wild beasts such as lions (mentioned 150 times in the Bible) and other beasts of prey, such as the leopard and forest boar, found a fertile haven in the dense thickets of trees in the jungle-like environment of the Jordan valley. From here they would migrate to the forests and mountains, pursuing flocks of sheep or goats and other domestic animals according to the seasons: “The intensive settlement on both sides of the Jordan limited the migrations of the wild beasts therein and precluded their roaming the mountains during peacetime. When an area bordering on the Jordan was abandoned because of war or forces of nature, the beasts immediately flocked to it, preying upon man and beast alike.”<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, if God cleared the land instantly, these wild beasts would once again roam freely and would wreak havoc, indiscriminately destroying all cultivated land and terrorizing the inhabitants:

**“A lion has come out of his lair; a destroyer of nations has set out.  
He has left his place to lay waste your land.  
Your towns will lie in ruins without inhabitant.” (Jer 4:7)**

In the New Testament, the writer of Hebrews reminds us that possessing our inheritance requires more than just “faith.” Rather it is through “faith and patience” we will inherit what has been promised (Heb 6:12). The threat of “wild beasts” in the Old Testament could well be analogous to making ourselves more vulnerable to satanic attack whenever we attempt to take on too much “land” too quickly. Just as Israel could not expect to plant, cultivate and protect vineyards, orchards and farms on a massive scale without leaving herself dangerously exposed on several fronts, neither can we launch a start-up, cultivate a new marriage, start a family, begin training for a triathlon, volunteer for the PTA, and serve the church simultaneously. If we attempt to take on too much new ground too soon we will fall prey to the wild beast of Satan, whom Peter describes as prowling “around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Pet 5:8).

Again, the operative term to describe the rate of possessing our inheritance is “**little by little,**” not only so that the wild beasts will not devour us, but also that we “become fruitful” (Exod 23:30 NASB). This truth will keep us from being discouraged in the midst of the battle. It coincides well with Paul’s exhortation to us to always “stand firm” in the battle:

**Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. (Eph 6:13)**

Having dealt with the temptation to give in to fear or discouragement, God now addresses the need to nourish hope, with the ultimate vision of a new world after victory.

## C. Nourishing Hope with a Vision for the End Exod 23:31-33

**“I will establish your borders from the Red Sea to the Sea of the Philistines, and from the desert to the River. I will hand over to you the people who live in the land and you will drive them out before you. Do not make a covenant with them or with their gods. Do not let them live in your land, or they will cause you to sin against me, because the worship of their gods will certainly be a snare to you.” (23:31-33)**

God draws the Book of the Covenant to a conclusion with a vision of his great gift of the vast and fertile Promised Land, from “sea to shining sea,” and desert to the River (the Euphrates on the northeast). Though progress to possess the land may seem slow at times, Israel should never lose sight of the ultimate goal and God’s determination to settle for nothing less than his original promise to Abraham. But while God’s eyes are fixed on the horizons of the land, Israel’s are once again to be focused on purging the land of its inhabitants and all vestiges of idolatry. This requires the tenacity of a farmer being vigilant to root out every weed from his land.

If your stomach turns at the thought of God cleansing the land of all the Canaanites, it is good to remind ourselves of the uncompromising holiness of God. Canaan was the most morally depraved place on the planet. With great patience God postponed his judgment for four generations for, as he told Abraham, “the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure” (Gen 15:16). To cleanse the land of its inhabitants and their idolatry was to establish the first commandment as supreme, worshipping the Lord alone in the new land. It also was designed to have a humbling effect upon Israel. God later explained in Deuteronomy that they were not to suppose it was on account of their righteousness that they were going to inherit the land, “but on account of the wickedness of these nations, the LORD your God will drive them out before you, to accomplish what he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” (Deut 9:5); and, if the truth be told, “you are a stiff-necked people” (Deut 9:6). So rather than asking, Why were the Canaanites condemned? the real question is, Why not us? Who are we to deserve God’s unmerited mercy and grace?

As we conclude the Book of the Covenant. I am struck by the primary character quality that is to permeate God’s people. It seems that when believers love God with the whole heart their communities are built on humility. Even when living in a world rampant with idolatry, rather than self-righteously ranting and raving at the world from Hollywood to Washington, the people of God are too fearful of idols in their own lives to condemn others, and therefore, like Jesus, do “not to shout or cry out, or raise [their] voice in the streets” (Isa 42:2) in their attempts to combat injustice. Instead, according to Paul’s injunction, they make it their “ambition to lead a quiet life,” minding their own business and working hard so that their “daily life may win the respect of outsiders” (1 Thess 4:11-12). And so, “little by little,” they faithfully sow their seeds of love, daily they diligently weed and water with grace, in season they prune with tenderness, and finally in due time, a vineyard, lush and fertile, gives life to more people than one could imagine (Gal 6:9).

This then is to be our vision of communities of *shalom* in a new land.

1 This title is taken from Luci Shaw, *Accompanied by Angels, Poems of the Incarnation* (Grand Rapids Mich.: Eerdmans, 2006).

2 Peter Enns, *Exodus* (TNAP; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2000), 470.

3 Douglas L. Stuart, *Exodus* (TNAC; Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman: 2006), 543.

4 Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology, An Exegetical, Canonical and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, forthcoming).

5 Enns, *Exodus*, 476.

6 Terence Fretheim, *Exodus* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 254.

7 Walter Brueggemann, “*Exodus*,” *NIB* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 1:877.

8 The number “six hundred thousand men on foot,” given in Exod 12:37, is based on translating the Hebrew word *‘eleph* as “one thousand.” Stuart in his commentary demonstrates the broad range of meaning of the term *‘eleph* from “thousand,” “cattle,” “clan,” “family,” to “tribe.” He argues that in a military context we should translate it something like “platoon” or “squad,” which would make six hundred *‘elephs* more like 7,200 fighting men and a total population that left Egypt around 28,800-36,000. Stuart, *Exodus*, 299-302.

9 Enns, *Exodus*, 475.

10 Cf. Lev 26:16-17, 36-37; Deut 28:20, 28-29, 32, 34, 65-67; 32:25, 30. Stuart, *Exodus*, 547.

11 Stuart, *Exodus*, 548.

12 Menashe Har-El, “The Pride of the Jordan – The Jungle of the Jordan,” *BA* 41.2, (June 1978), 74.